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BOOK REVIEWS

Thomison, Dennis. *A History of the American Library Association, 1876-1972*. Chicago: American Library Assn., 1978. 301p. \$30. LC 77-27966. ISBN 0-8389-0251-0.

With the publication of Dennis Thomison's history of the American Library Association, librarians and others may now take a retrospective glance at the dreams, achievements, failures, and follies of their professional organization.

Covering the years 1876-1972, the author has written a selective history highlighting the activities of the association's deliberative bodies and executive leadership. Less attention is devoted to ALA's many divisions and to such important topics as library education, which have been treated previously in specialized studies. This volume is not a commemorative panegyric; Thomison injects critical assessments of ALA's performance throughout the text.

The year 1876 still must rate as the most significant in the history of American librarianship. Fortuitously, most of the elements characteristic of a profession—leadership, organization, communication, and cognitive foundation—converged to ensure the basis for orderly development. Few professional associations were launched with such a superb cast. The founding fathers of ALA—Melvil Dewey, William F. Poole, Charles A. Cutter, and Justin Winsor, among the more prominent—are justifiably venerated for their creative contributions.

Other elements were publication of the *American Library Journal*, printing of Dewey's *Decimal Classification* and Cutter's *Rules for a Printed Dictionary Catalogue*, and distribution of the U.S. Bureau of Education's *Public Libraries in the United States*.

For the next several decades, ALA expended much energy defining the parameters of librarianship and addressing technical matters. Even during the nineteenth century, problems emerged and issues were debated that would continue to the present. Among these were censorship, democratization of the association, recruitment, regulation of library education, and participation

in the selection of the Librarian of Congress.

In 1909, ALA felt the sting of fragmentation with the formation of the Special Libraries Association. ALA's participation in World War I quite unexpectedly transformed it from a small professional body with limited resources into a public welfare organization serving the library needs of several million soldiers.

Euphoric over its wartime successes, ALA fashioned the enlarged program in 1919, a bold plan that encompassed creation of an endowment, adult education, extensive publicity, and reforms in library education. Divisive internal bickering, coupled with an unresponsive public, proved too difficult to overcome, and ALA suffered a humiliating defeat.

Despite this setback, the 1920s signalled the beginning of the association's modern era. A strong executive secretary, Carl Milam, was appointed; international library relations were promoted; library education was more closely monitored; and the adult education movement flourished.

The depression years were difficult for everyone, and ALA was confronted by serious problems and critical choices. The association's Board of Education for Librarianship was criticized by many for failing to curtail the supply of graduates in a time of considerable unemployment. Benefactions from the Carnegie Corporation were less generous after the corporation concluded that some ALA activities "may well have surpassed the limits of prudence."

Various special committees made proposals to decentralize the association and to bridge the estrangement believed to exist between the headquarters staff and the membership. Under Milam's prodding, sustained support for federal aid to libraries was achieved. Thomison describes the abortive attempt to prevent the appointment of poet Archibald MacLeish to the post of Librarian of Congress as a "shrill, histrionic outburst."

World War II again stimulated the association's interest in international library affairs. During the 1940s an International Relations Office was established, and ALA acted as midwife to the birth of the Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin in Mexico. Pur-

suit of the federal connection was intensified by creation of a Washington office in 1945.

Divisional dissatisfaction resurfaced after the war when the Association of College and Research Libraries made forceful demands for more autonomy and improved financial support. By 1948, many in ALA were restive over Milam's long tenure and sometimes autocratic leadership. Milam's exit was undoubtedly influenced by a committee report, which criticized the association's centralized approach and lax financial management.

With varying degrees of courage, ALA faced threats emanating from the virulent anti-intellectualism of the McCarthy era. Loyalty oaths, book labeling, and censorship of library materials in overseas libraries were condemned. In 1953, the eloquent Freedom to Read Statement was adopted, an expression that still guides the association's commitment to intellectual freedom.

Following a decade of struggle, federal aid to libraries became a reality with passage of the Library Services Act in 1956. A cascade of federal library programs, all endorsed by ALA, were soon to come. Further democratization of the association was recommended by a management consulting firm in 1955. More divisions were created, and the Council assumed more policy-making prerogatives.

The leadership was clearly uncomfortable about the calls for an organizational response to the wrenching national debate on human rights during the 1960s. When a 1963 report, *Access to Public Libraries*, concluded that direct discrimination was found in sixteen southern states and that indirect discrimination was prevalent throughout the country, many northerners were outraged.

By 1968 younger members began a sustained assault on what they viewed as ALA's cumbersome bureaucracy, elitism, and insensitivity to social issues. Once more committees were appointed, and modest gains were achieved in making the association more responsive. Perhaps the greatest legacy of this period was an enhanced commitment to the principle of intellectual freedom.

Clearly, the first hundred years have been a fascinating odyssey. Enduring

achievements may be claimed in the areas of standards, education, intellectual freedom, legislation, and publishing. Still awaiting resolution is the pervasive fragmentation that militates against a shared vision.

In passing judgment on the merits of Thomison's volume, one must differentiate the objective of history to educate from the objective to achieve an authentic reconstruction. The writing is felicitous, at times moving, and the conclusions generally sound. Apart from the limitations of overreliance on secondary sources and questionable omissions, such as a contextual discussion of the professionalization of American society, librarians should profit from reading this study.

One can readily agree with Edward Holley's prefatory comment that Thomison has identified the persistent issues and thus made it easier to avoid roasting the same chestnuts again.

When evaluated as a work of scholarship, some disquieting observations must be noted. Conceptual acuity is sometimes absent. For example, the author fails to explore the early period as a clash between elitists and advocates of the diffusion of knowledge. More than two dozen misspellings and factual inaccuracies have been identified. The names of ALA presidents Linda Eastman and Frances Spain are incorrectly rendered in several places; Frank Hill is referred to as Frederick; the title of the Williamson report of 1923 is inaccurately transcribed; and the American Expeditionary Force is wrongly named the Allied Expeditionary Force. More substantive errors, such as the assertion that ALA first endorsed federal library legislation in 1930 (it was 1919), reflect inadequate primary research.

Regrettably, the \$30 price tag will not stimulate the broad exposure needed to prevent a reroasting of those chestnuts. A paperback edition is urgently recommended.—Arthur P. Young, *University of Alabama*.

Use of Medical Literature. Editor: L. T. Morton. 2d ed. Information Sources for Research and Development. London, Boston: Butterworths, 1977. 462p. \$24.95. LC 77-30008. ISBN 0-408-